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Reimagining Ecumenism for the 21st Century—Stăniloae's Theology as a Source and Inspiration

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Abstract: There are many competent voices who estimate that in recent years ecumenism has been going through a crisis. Concern for ecumenical dialogue is becoming secondary for many theologians or members of the clergy, including hierarchs, who are preoccupied almost exclusively with addressing the problems facing their local and confessional communities. As a result, receptivity to ecumenical dialogue and cooperation is even lower among the faithful, who are preoccupied with assessing their own Christian identity in a socio-cultural context marked by rapid change and unprecedented challenges, of which secularism is only one of many. The disappointing assessment of the state of contemporary ecumenism, has led some ecumenists to an effort of identifying solutions for reimagining interconfessional dialogue in an ever-changing world. Theologians from all Christian traditions seek to contribute to identifying ways to unblock the current situation and to propose concrete approaches for rethinking ecumenism for future generations of believers. One of the ways suggested in the literature is to think of ecumenism less in terms of theological agreements, and more in terms of a process of mutual learning, considering that we can receive and offer our gifts in a mutual process, being aware of the need for each community to be open to such a perspective. In this paper, we argue that the constant receptivity to Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae's theology, and to his anthropology in particular, that exists in Western traditions can be an opportunity for revitalising the ecumenical dialogue through the gift exchange model described above. We start from the premise that Fr. Stăniloae's work represents an important gift not just for the Orthodox, but also for many Protestant and Catholic theologians, and we suggest that this direction can produce a reciprocal effect on Orthodox theologians to open up and receive the gifts of Western theology.

Keywords: ecumenism; Stăniloae; gift exchange; anthropology

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1. Introduction

At the end of the 20th century, the ecumenical movement reached a crisis moment, that some described as an “ecumenical winter”. This decline related both to past approaches to interconfessional dialogue and to the results achieved. In the face of this impasse, a growing number of competent voices have pointed out that ecumenism needs a different approach for the 21st century (Meyer 1999; Kasper 2004; Murray 2010; Kinnamon 2014; Pizzey 2019; Porumb 2019).

These new approaches appear to move away from the apparently illusionary goal of regaining the lost institutional unity of the Church, as noble and legitimate a purpose as that may be, towards one that would be focused much more realistically on the ability of each Christian tradition to define itself coherently and to uphold its own identity, while at the same time to be increasingly more open to collaboration with other denominations in order to receptively learn from their experience. The foundational premise of these new approaches is that, to a greater or a lesser degree, each Christian tradition would have things to give, as “gifts” to the others, and things to learn and receive from them.

Understanding ecumenism as a gift exchange involves the idea of mutual openness of Christian communities to give and receive the gifts of experience and the understanding gained by each of them (O’Gara 2010). But for believers to be able to go beyond a formal institutional approach to what can be given and received, this model of ecumenism would benefit from engaging with the depth of Christian theology on the theme the gift. This conversation could be further enriched by an interaction with contemporary philosophical reflections on this topic (in authors such as Mauss, Derrida, Caputo, Marion, or Milbank), which, for the sake of brevity, will not be discussed in the present paper. According to the Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloae, the gift is the sign of interpersonal love between God and human beings, as well as between fellow humans. However, the reciprocity of giving and receiving is beyond any social or religious convention. It is, par excellence, the experience of manifesting freedom and self-expression and fulfilling ourselves as personal beings. As signs of divine love, gifts are also signs of the understanding of the fact that all things originate from God and that because of this we all share in the richness of his being (Stăniloae 2000, pp. 21–23). Thus, Christian experience as a gift to others is the foundation for any authentic ecumenical dialogue.

In the context of the current attempts to revive ecumenical engagement, we believe that two aspects can play an important role in achieving concrete results. The first is related to the search for new approaches or models of thinking and of practicing ecumenism. The second is that the whole Christian community is facing new theological challenges, coming especially from the world of human sciences, which have an acute impact particularly in the field of anthropology. Rather than perceiving these as threats, theological reflection in this area can bring churches together to find common solutions to current problems, while at the same time engaging with relevant matters in society at large.

In this paper, we argue that the constant receptivity of Fr. Stăniloae’s theology in Western traditions is an opportunity for reviving ecumenical dialogue through the gift exchange model. We start from the assumption that Stăniloae’s anthropology is an important gift not only for the Orthodox, but also for many Protestant and Catholic theologians. His thinking about human nature and the place of humanity in the world—more precisely, his emphasis on human consubstantiality and its implications for the value of the human person on the one side, and the role of human persons as priests of creation, on the other—represents a useful springboard for finding answers to current challenges. Furthermore, it also encourages mutual openness of theologians from different traditions to receive and offer the gifts of their Christian experience and thus to bring churches closer together.

Within this framework, we structure our paper in three sections. In the first, we present some aspects of the complex legacy of the past that led to the current “ecumenical winter”. In the second, we highlight some examples of new attempts to energize ecumenism at the beginning of the 21st century. In the third, we begin by presenting the gift exchange model for ecumenism and how Fr. Stăniloae’s ecumenical theology and anthropology puts this model to work. We exemplify this with two aspects of Fr. Stăniloae’s anthropology that could be considered as a launchpad for ecumenical dialogue: the value of human persons and their dignity as priests in creation. The paper ends with a set of conclusions.

2. Ecumenism in Decline—A Complex Heritage

At the present time, the ecumenical movement has reached a major impasse. Various theologians have characterised this situation either as a deep crisis or as having reached a turning point (Kasper 2004, p. 155). The description of this critical state as an “ecumenical winter” reflects “both the experience of ecumenical decline over the last decades, and the difficulties facing ecumenism today” (Pizzey 2019, p. 181). This decline refers both to past approaches to inter-church dialogue and to the results achieved. At the same time, this stalemate and cooling down in ecumenical engagement is also linked to a series of challenges that each church has to face both internally and in relation to a complex society marked by phenomena such as pluralism, globalisation, and secularism (Zizioulas 2015; Pizzey 2019, p. 180), as well as economic, social, and environmental crises. Furthermore,

the support offered by the Russian Orthodox hierarchy to the current Russian invasion of Ukraine challenged not only the unity of the global Orthodox community, but also the ecumenical relations between Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants. By lending its unwavering support and even justifying the atrocities committed by the Russian invading army in Ukraine, Russian Orthodoxy has put a huge strain on its fellowship with most of the other Orthodox Churches. It has also prompted strong suggestions from ecumenical partners for the disaffiliation of the Russian Orthodox Church from the WCC (Conger 2022).

The attitudes of Christian leaders towards ecumenism vary in all church traditions from overly optimistic, seeing in it the sign of the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God, to extremely antithetic, with various fundamentalist perspectives seeing ecumenism as a heresy and a threat to the mere existence of the Church. Within Orthodoxy, such views and attitudes towards ecumenism are well summarised in the *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism* (Kalaitzidis et al. 2014).

In our opinion, ecumenism in the 20th century represents a spectrum of positions between two diametrically opposed approaches.

2.1. The Coming Back Home Model

The first approach, promoted by more traditionalist circles within Catholicism and Orthodoxy, we would call the “coming back home model”. It starts from the premise that there is only “one true Church” (be that the Orthodox or the Catholic one) which has kept unaltered “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 1:3). According to this view, the present disunity in the body of Christ, which is such a scandal for the witness of the Gospel in the world, cannot be attributed to any extent to this “true Church” but is the result of human pride and/or heresy (departure from the dogma) by various groups of Christians at certain points in the history of the Church. As such, in order for any ecumenical effort to have legitimacy, its aim should be to call all the other Christian communities to humbly “come back home”, re-joining, in genuine repentance, the only “one true Church”, from which they were once sadly separated. Although this view is not endorsed in official documents, as it is more a popular sentiment than a theoretical position, it is a pervading one in historical churches and is implicit in the idea that the Orthodox Church (or alternatively, the Catholic Church) is the “one true Church”. As such, the only legitimate way of ecumenical engagement is for everybody else to become either Catholics or Orthodox. A good example to illustrate this view is a book including a series of testimonies of people from other Christian traditions who became Orthodox (Gillquist 2006). The language they use is expressive of the sentiment mentioned above, which is present in almost all “converts” to Orthodoxy. For these people, embracing Orthodoxy was not conversion, but really “coming home”.

The positive side of this approach is its strong affirmation of the creedal statement that there is only “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church”, even if that is located exclusively in a particular confessional expression which, as such, becomes the only legitimate expression of the “body of Christ”. It is no surprise that such a perspective, of a dominant church, is viewed with suspicion by the various Protestant and evangelical groups involved in the ecumenical movement. One may detect in this perspective an unavoidable inherent triumphalism, that can never be a fertile ground for self-reflection and genuine Christian humility. We may even wonder if such an approach could be legitimately described as being ecumenical; its “all or nothing” absolutism could never be conducive to genuine and sustainable unity, unless those who accept it are willing to completely lose their identity and distinctiveness.

2.2. The Compromise Model

At the other end of the realistic spectrum, we find a different approach that we would call the “compromise model”, favoured primarily by liberal mainline Protestant churches. This is at the core of the ecumenical vision of the World Council of Churches (WCC). In principle, it invites churches to define the Christian essentials and to unite

around a common dogmatic core, while allowing for differences in adiaphora, in matters of theological opinion, and of contextual emphases (WCC 2012). It is essentially seeking for the reestablishment of the institutional unity of the Church, which was lost because of the various schisms and their subsequent effects. The practical means by which this process was developed consisted in a continuous series of meetings, at various levels, in which official representatives and leaders of various churches discussed and negotiated, seeking to obtain the envisioned compromise. In all this, ecumenism was reduced, more or less, to ecclesial politics, with all that politics entails, the “good, the bad and the ugly”.

Positively, at the core of this approach is the realisation of the fact that, whether we like it or not, the world is changing continuously, and the Church is changing with it. The Church is not the same now as it was at the time of the Nestorian schism in 431, or of the Chalcedonian schism in 451; not even as it was at the time of the Great Schism in 1054, nor that of the schism created, even if inadvertently, by the Reformation, in 1517. The healing of the rifts created by these fractures could not be achieved by “going back” to the situations that occasioned them, because there was no “back” to go to. A sustainable solution could be found only by taking into consideration the state of the Church and of the world as it had become, and by looking forward.

Although the restoration of institutional ecclesial unity, as idealistic and even utopian as it may seem, is a welcome goal of ecumenism for Christians from most ecclesial traditions, maybe with the exception of (some) evangelicals, nevertheless it may involve major risks that some ecclesial traditions are not willing to accept. And rightly so. Any “compromise” that would affect the “apostolic foundation” or the dogmatic core on which the Church stands would give a fatal blow to its identity and will make it cease to be truly the “mystical body of Christ”.

It is no surprise then, that this approach has led to the current ecumenical crisis.

3. New Approaches and Challenges to Ecumenism in the 21st Century

In the face of this impasse, a number of competent voices stress that ecumenism needs a different approach for the 21st century. In the past, attempts to find Christian unity have been linked to proposals to analyse confessional theological traditions and to find a way of dogmatic and institutional convergence between churches. The new approaches are much more focused on the ability of each Christian tradition to define more coherently its own identity and, at the same time, to be open to collaboration with and learning from other churches. This strategy is more likely to identify common ground for dialogue and greater unity than the one that starts with an analysis of differences. At the beginning of the 21st century, theologians from different traditions are trying to revisit the theme of ecumenism with new directions and possibly new solutions in order to bring the ecumenical movement out of crisis. In this section, we present examples of such attempts which are received with more confidence by theologians.

3.1. Catholic Initiatives

In recent decades, the Catholic Church was probably the most ecumenically active ecclesial community. Some of its actions were aimed at bringing Catholics and other denominations closer together, while others were attempts to contribute to theological reflection on the unity of all Christians. In the first category, we mention two dialogue initiatives between Catholics and Protestants. In 2013, Catholics and Lutherans developed the document titled “From Conflict to Communion”. It highlights the need for Christian unity and the fact that the two churches have more in common than what separates them. This document was also a tool for preparing the common commemoration of 500 years from the Reformation. Another initiative was The Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), which has reached its third stage of work since the beginning of 2011. The document “Walking Together on the Way: Learning to be the Church–Local, Regional, Universal”, released in 2018, stipulates the openness of the two churches to learn

from each other, and emphasizes the shared heritage of the two traditions and the fact that each has something valuable to offer the other (ARCIC III 2018, pp. 22–50).

In the area of theological contributions to ecumenism, we highlight important Catholic models that have the potential to develop into new ecumenical approaches. A first model is that of “spiritual ecumenism”, proposed at the Second Vatican Council in the document *Unitatis redintegratio*. This document emphasizes that ecumenism is a spiritual activity, based on the work of the Holy Spirit, the one who unites believers in the body of Christ. This approach to ecumenism is based on the idea that Christian unity cannot be achieved without placing the work of the Holy Spirit at the centre of its efforts (Vatican Council II 2014). Thus, spiritual ecumenism is a model that emphasizes the importance of the relationship of the individual believer and each local church to Jesus Christ first. It all starts with the process of their conversion and orientation towards God. The horizontal relationships, projects, and actions leading to a rapprochement between Christian communities can follow only after this first necessary movement. Walter Kaspers sees spiritual ecumenism as an approach that invites every believer to participate in the high priestly ministry of Jesus Christ in the world. This model is of great importance because it considers the specifics of today’s society, in which people have less faith in dogma and more openness to spirituality (Kasper 2004, pp. 156–57). For Pizzey, the main aspects of this model are “interior conversion, pneumatology, the emphasis on the virtuous and affective levels of ecumenical activity, and even implicitly, the ecumenical gift exchange” (Pizzey 2019, p. 145). This idea that ecumenism is a gift exchange process will be explored separately in the next section as a possible self-standing model that could contribute to the development of the ecumenical movement in the future. The importance of spiritual ecumenism for the Roman Catholic tradition is well emphasized by several authors. We mention here the opinion of Walter Kasper, who suggests that this model is the true soul of ecumenism, because it provides the spiritual grounds of the movement and inspires the approaches that will follow, as rooted in its pneumatological foundation (Kasper 2004).

The second model, that of “receptive ecumenism” (Murray 2010, pp. 5–25) focuses on a process of inward searching and conversion, in which each church seeks to become aware of what it is lacking and could be supplemented by the spiritual gifts of other church’s traditions. This model is based on a willingness to learn from others, an openness to change through learning and through what we can receive from other churches. The process of learning through receptivity is a driving force that can stimulate ecumenical engagement. Receptive ecumenism has at its heart the following question: what can my own church tradition learn from others? The focus of this model is the attitude of receptive and transformational learning at the level of Christian communities, both for individual believers and for church bodies. Through the work of growth and development that each community open to learning from others is undertaking, a real way of mutual knowledge and communication between Christians can emerge. Receptivity to learning from others, and openness to change through what we can learn from other Christian traditions, is an engine that can stimulate greater ecumenical engagement (Murray 2010, p. 14).

The two models proposed by Roman Catholic theologians for overcoming the crisis in which the ecumenical movement finds itself presently are complementary. Spiritual ecumenism tries to stress the importance of the spiritual dimension of the dialogue between churches, implicitly of prayer and lay participation, beyond the actions and measures undertaken at hierarchical and institutional level. Receptive ecumenism continues from and builds on the previous model. Rediscovering the spirituality of ecumenism also involves self-critical learning in humility and ecclesial conversion as essential premises for a real closeness between churches.

3.2. Orthodox Reactions

In the face of this crisis, the Orthodox Churches reacted more slowly. For various reasons, during this period the most consistent voices discussing the topic of ecumenical engagement are those of Orthodox theologians living in the Diaspora, where Orthodoxy is

a minority. These thinkers, for the most part, are from the Russian, Greek, and Romanian communities living in the West. Among other Romanian theologians writing on Ecumenism and Diaspora (Turcescu 2002; Bordeianu 2011; Maican 2019; Porumb 2019; Coman 2020; Apintiliese and Pogor 2022) we limit us in this text to contributions of two authors that reflect on the present and future dynamics of ecumenism. Răzvan Porumb and Radu Bordeianu are two important theologians who, through their work and the perspectives they bring as Orthodox, represent a breath of fresh air into the ecumenical dialogue. These authors emphasize the potential of Stăniloae's theology for the development of means and models for continuing the dialogue between churches. In their work, they note the importance of the ecclesiology of the Romanian theologian, one that is Trinitarian and ecumenical, and is based on the idea that the unity of the Church, as it is historically manifested at the level of local churches, is sustained by Christ. For ecumenical reflection, the "open sobornicity" model developed by the Romanian theologian (Stăniloae 1971) remains an important option for the 21st century.

In his work *Orthodoxy and Ecumenism*, Porumb considers that, from an Orthodox perspective, at least four approaches to ecumenism can be identified that could represent a better and more effective participation of the Orthodox in the ecumenical movement: a. journeying together—the ongoing engagement; b. unity as the core of Christian life and identity; c. ecumenism as a spiritual enterprise; and d. ecumenism as a koinonia of diversities (Porumb 2019, pp. 195–222). For the author, all of these possible paradigms are based on a Trinitarian vision of God as a communitarian being, and on an understanding of humans as beings moving towards a higher communion with God and with their fellow human beings. Dumitru Stăniloae has developed such a theological vision and it can be the foundation for a specific Orthodox approach to the ecumenical dialogue. Porumb considers that the concept of *human consubstantiality* developed by Stăniloae defines Christian life as a communion of believers with the persons of the Holy Trinity, and that this theological vision can contribute to ecumenism. Porumb explores the orientation of the churches' efforts to heal and overcome the divisions that currently exist among Christians, and those of finding means to actualize at the level of the churches the same kind of unity that already exists at the human level through the work of the Holy Trinity in the world (Porumb 2019, pp. 232–33). Although Porumb seems to indicate here a possible contribution to the ecumenical dialogue coming from the theology of Fr. Stăniloae, his arguments build on his ecclesiology rather than on his anthropology, which is our particular interest in this paper.

Radu Bordeianu, another Romanian Orthodox theologian living in the Diaspora, goes in the same direction, considering that the ecclesiology developed by Stăniloae could be an important contribution to the advancement of the ecumenical dialogue. The author argues that Stăniloae's ecclesiology is Trinitarian and ecumenical (Bordeianu 2011, p. 34). In this view, the divine unity of the persons of the Trinity is to be reflected in the unity of Christians at the level of local churches. These historical communities also actualise the fullness of the universal Church. As a result, the unity of the Church is guaranteed in Christ and is historically manifested at the level of local churches. For Bordeianu, this theological conception of Fr. Stăniloae provides an important theological and methodological framework for discussing sensitive issues at the ecumenical level and could stimulate progress towards convergence among Christian churches (Bordeianu 2011, p. 44).

4. The Gift Exchange Model and the Promise of Stăniloae's Anthropology for Reimagining Ecumenical Dialogue

4.1. The Gift Exchange Model

The "gift exchange" model, understood in terms of spiritual ecumenism rather than the institutional approach that dominated the last century, could be one of the most promising proposals for ecumenical dialogues within the 21st century. The concept originates from the Catholic documents *Lumen Gentium* (see LG, § 13) and *Ut Unum Sint*, which makes a distinction between ecumenism as an "exchange of ideas" and as an "exchange of gifts". This model asserts that different Christian churches have gifts to offer each other, but that

each gift ultimately comes from the Holy Spirit for the enrichment of Christ's Church. Starting from this perspective, Margaret O'Gara argues, in her text "Receiving Gifts in Ecumenical Dialogue", that in ecumenism, dialogue should be viewed not as a "melting pot", that obliterates differences between churches, but rather as a "mosaic", where each contribution is valued as an essential part of the whole, while at the same time they balance and correct each other where necessary (O'Gara 2010, p. 27).

In this framework, an exchange of gifts leads churches deeper into conversion to Christ and closer to each other, a goal made possible by the real communion that exists already within the Body of Christ. Yet, the acceptance of a gift presupposes a certain degree of ecclesial humility, even a process of inner conversion, the admission of a certain deficiency, of something lacking in one's ecclesial tradition which could be complemented by a corresponding strength manifested in another community.

The discussion above resonates well with Stăniloae's concept of "open sobornicity", which continues to receive attention in ecumenical theological research (Stăniloae 1971). Even if it emphasizes primarily, in a typical manner, what the Orthodox can offer to others, the model reflects to a certain extent the mindset behind the gift exchange model of ecumenism. In a similar way, we see a convergence between Stăniloae's preoccupation for synodality and Pope Francis' current two-year global Catholic consultation process in preparation for a conciliar reunion on synodality, an initiative having obvious ecumenical implications. The theological grounding of this process was set a few years earlier in the 2018 document of the International Theological Commission of the Vatican titled "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church" (CNA 2021).

In the present paper, we want to underline that the ecumenical potential of Stăniloae's theology cannot be limited to his ecclesiological reflections, but that in his theological reflections there are several anthropological ideas that could nourish new ecumenical interactions.

As Metropolitan Kallistos himself pointed out, perhaps the most important challenge for Orthodox theology in the 21st century comes from the field of anthropology (Ware 2012). Thus, the efforts of the Christian community to understand and respond to the problems of the applications of artificial intelligence, neuroscience, biotechnology, and genetics for humanity cannot have meaningful results without the energies of all the churches in both theological reflection and practical Christian life. In the face of analyses linked to the nature and meaning of human existence, ecumenical dialogue can no longer be an option, but becomes an absolute necessity. If, as some argue, the approach of theological reflection by some Orthodox thinkers in the neo-patristic movement has had a negative influence on their ecumenical engagement (Kalaitzidis 2014), this orientation towards the roots of theological thought can nevertheless be a source of theological renewal and ecumenical openness. In discussions on concepts related to the human person, most frequently the contribution of the Orthodox Church to contemporary theology and anthropology is related the various theological positions of the Greek theologians Christos Yannaras and John Zizioulas. In the present paper, we argue that, until now, the contribution of Fr. Stăniloae to this conversation has been undervalued, mostly because the Romanian theologian participated very little in the international academic world, living his life in a communist country, and he produced his work in Romanian, with it being translated very late into English, most of it after 1989. We believe that some of the ideas he has formulated in this field can play a substantial role in the effort of developing consistent responses to the challenges of Christian theology in contemporary society, and also represent a source of inspiration and a launchpad for reimagining ecumenism. We present here synthetically two relevant aspects of Stăniloae's anthropology and the role they can play in the dialogue between churches, as a gift offered by the Orthodox Church to other Christian communities.

4.2. The Value of the Human Person—Human Consubstantiality

Stăniloae's anthropology is built on the concept of personhood. In his view, the most coherent definition of the image of God in the human being is rooted in the mode of existence of the divine being as a communion in love of the persons of the Holy Trinity.

Starting from the Cappadocian Fathers, the Romanian theologian considers that the patristic language distinguishing between the divine essence (*ousia*) and person (*hypostasis*), and it can also be applied to the human being. He argues that the image of the Holy Trinity, that is, the unity of persons sharing the same nature, is also reflected at the level of human beings (Stăniloae 1998, p. 250). For him, “the person is nothing other than the mode of real subsistence that belongs to a nature” (Stăniloae 1998, p. 256). It is also important to point out that for Stăniloae the fall did not break the ontological unity of human nature, but it rendered it incapable of actualization through the exercise of the gnostic will (Stăniloae 1998, p. 253). This anthropological vision of Stăniloae is rooted in the Christological anthropology of the Church Fathers, which was emphasized at the Council of Chalcedon, affirming that, through his incarnation, Jesus Christ is consubstantial with us and binds us all in communion with himself: “Human consubstantiality does not consist, therefore, only in the fact that one and the same nature is possessed by persons who are remote from one another. It consists also in a unique being which all the hypostases bear in solidarity with one another” (Stăniloae 1998, p. 254).

The implications of this anthropological vision are very meaningful in terms of responding to the challenges that today’s society brings both for the Christian community and for the ecumenical dialogue. We underline here two aspects that are strongly linked. The first stresses the importance of human solidarity in general and Christian solidarity in particular. The idea of the consubstantiality of all people commits us to contribute responsibly to the present and future existence of the human race. The full actualisation in Christ of this reality of human solidarity invites Christians to the kenotic experience of self-emptying and loving others with the love of Jesus. Unity with God and the fulfilment of the meaning of human existence cannot be achieved “in isolation, but in the solidarity of each person with his neighbour” (Stăniloae 1998, p. 256). The second aspect is related to the importance of the value and dignity of the human person and the inviolability of human nature. Respect for the uniqueness and incommensurability of the person is the axiological and conceptual basis for addressing current issues related to bioethics, genetics, nanotechnology, etc. At the same time, at the ecclesial level, the value of the human person is the basis and invitation for all Christian communities to understand the diversity of the forms of expression of faith in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

4.3. A New Ascetic Life—Priests in Creation

Another central idea of Stăniloae’s anthropology concerns his view of the place and role of human beings in creation. In line with the thought of St. Maximus the Confessor, the Romanian theologian considers that the world is the work of God and is meant to participate in the dialogue and interpersonal communion between the human and the divine person (Stăniloae 1998, p. 11). The solidarity between humanity and rest of the created order comes not only from their ontological bond as part of the same universe of creation, but also from the fact that there is a common dynamic of divinity for both humanity and the world (Stăniloae 2000, p. 1). The human person’s role is to be a partner of God in the process of realising the communion of creation with the creator. But the world was created for humanity as a gift of God for the human person (Stăniloae 2000, p. 21). This gift is an invitation to dialogue, to know God from what has been created and then to act upon it, because human beings give the world back to the creator through their creative contribution. The idea of gift dialogue (Stăniloae 2000, p. 22), which involves both receiving the gift and returning it, is specific to the Romanian theologian’s thinking about humanity’s position in creation. The world is the place of encounter between the divine and the human person, the setting of authentic personal manifestation as self-giving to the other. Furthermore, Stăniloae considers that the role of human beings is to be priests over the entire cosmos (Stăniloae 2000, p. 81). Through this kind of priesthood, their task is to further develop solidarity among people and between human beings and the rest of creation through a new asceticism, a positive one, that involves work and sacrifice (Stăniloae 2000, p. 6). This asceticism is developed by Stăniloae from the theology of

creation *ex nihilo* and the fact that we are limited created beings. The assumption of these limits implies the common sharing of the world's resources, the development of a spirit of solidarity and human brotherhood that requires us to take care of the resources that God has given us. In this priestly office, humans have a double responsibility. The first is to use creation for self-development, for the knowledge of God, and the affirmation of one's capacities. The second is to take care of creation, with its finite resources, not to destroy it by over-consumption and pollution (Stăniloae 2000, p. 7). Even if the Romanian theologian does not give more precise indications on how this kind of asceticism can be realized to preserve natural resources for the future of humanity, it is clear that it involves joint efforts from all nations. And, Christian churches can play an essential role in this endeavour both by reinforcing this message and by working together to identify and propose commonly agreed ideas and practices to reduce destruction and waste.

This insight opens multiple opportunities of ecumenical engagement in terms of fruitful dialogue with various scientific disciplines, which could challenge and enrich theological reflection. This understanding of the role and place of humans in creation can play a very important role in the current context, marked by globalisation, economic crises, global warming, etc. It could be useful for the Church in the formulation of a coherent theological response to all these issues affecting the life of the faithful and of humanity in general. Such a response cannot be given in isolation but needs the convergence of all churches towards a coherent common position that expresses the Christian understanding of human's responsibilities towards creation. The new asceticism proposed by Stăniloae must first be practiced by the Christian community through a united effort of understanding and application, and then it can be proposed to the whole of society as a coherent way of managing the current and future challenges to our place on this planet. All of this requires Christians to work together and converge, to find solutions that will enable us to fulfil our call as priests of creation.

5. Conclusions

The key suggestion of this paper is that instead of church communities looking towards each other with the aim of reaching dogmatic agreement and institutional unity, a better and more effective way towards ecumenicity would be for them to work together, in the same direction, inspired by the "gift exchange" model, through theological reflection, common prayer, and practical service in response to the major challenges of a world in crisis.

Among these, anthropological challenges seem to be the most important ones at this time in history. And, since anthropology has replaced ecclesiology as the focus of theological reflection in this century, we suggest that performing anthropology together might not only help churches to enrich each other with their mutual spiritual gifts but would also help them to grow closer to each other.

We finally contend that in Stăniloae's holistic anthropology we have several important insights that might help revive ecumenical reflection and cooperation in this new century.

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